

Chapter 7

Sharing Learning: Cross-Country Observations

Based on the foregoing analysis, this concluding chapter reflects on the emerging cross-country/regional patterns, convergences and divergences, and comments on challenges and critical factors that impact on and are conducive to the implementation of RVA. The aim is to push the RVA agenda forward towards a set of global/international benchmarks and strategic areas that will facilitate the exchange of ideas across countries and at the same time enable countries to develop their own understandings and judgements of what might be required in their own country contexts.

To facilitate this learning process, it is useful to focus on differences and common features in a dynamic way by focusing on the following themes:

1. The strategic value of RVA
2. The multidimensional and multi-targeted approaches to RVA
3. Features of best practice and quality RVA processes
4. Challenges and future country directions in RVA

These themes provide useful points of reference for sharing learning on RVA policy and practice across countries, and between developed and developing countries.

7.1 The Strategic Value of RVA

There is little doubt that a cohesive and coherent approach to RVA is essential. Starting with the strategic areas that have emerged out of this analysis (Chaps. 3, 4 and 5), this section will look at some of the differences and commonalities within themes on RVA's strategic value.

One *first lesson* that can be drawn from the country examples is that targeted *policies, legislation and sector-wide education reforms* play an important role in promoting the cause of RVA. Legislative reform raises the profile of non-formal and informal learning, attracts attention from private stakeholders, and facilitates linkages between qualification sub-frameworks more generally. These improve take-up of RVA and can add to the legitimacy of new RVA systems. Countries show a wide variety of approaches to the policy and legislative context in which the recognition of learning from non-formal and informal settings occurs. A distinction can be made between those countries which have inclusive policies and a legal framework for RVA, and those which have set policies and legislation in some subsectors of the education and training system. The former are more likely to be among the countries moving in the direction of developing RVA systems or quasi-systems that include financial provision, quality assurance, and a high level of acceptance in society. Several countries have subsumed RVA under laws regulating NQFs and their regulatory bodies. The case of the USA, however, demonstrates that RVA activity levels can be high in the absence of specific government policies, legislation or national qualifications frameworks. In the USA, there is a tradition of locating recognition policies and processes at the level of an institution or organisation.

The second lesson is that *recognition policy must be calibrated with broader policy objectives*. These objectives can be educational, economic, social and cultural aims which governments seek to promote. Whatever the case, providing guidance for a country's recognition policy through concrete policy objectives is important for the overall success of the initiatives. A significant point concerns the value of expanding the objectives of the recognition process to include the reduction of inequality, poverty and social exclusion in both the education system and broader society. Regardless of whether this is achieved directly or indirectly, opening up further learning opportunities via RVA is a constructive step to diminishing engrained and persistent inequality and promoting sustainable development. There are opportunities for RVA even where there appears to be a general shift of RVA priorities and practices from a broader access agenda to one that is suited to a global economic agenda. RVA could provide a means for higher education institutions to attract experienced students, many of whom may be unemployed because of the global economic downturn. While "external" goals such as employment and qualifications are served by RVA in many contexts, RVA needs to speak to the "internal" dimensions – the aspiration of individuals to be recognised for what they already know, to be given access to new learning opportunities and to contribute to society through creative and meaningful work. RVA is essential for recognising the skills that already exist in the workplace and informal economies, creating learning pathways where gaps exist.

The third lesson is that the involvement of all stakeholders is essential to the success or failure of recognition policies. While most systems aim to operate with shared responsibility, often the balance is tipped towards either industry- or public authority-learning arrangements. Very often the role of agencies of civil society

and the adult learning sectors are neglected. The benefits of RVA are associated with the involvement and interests of various stakeholders. Recognition policies should therefore reflect the level of cooperation between education, economic and civil society actors. *Creating a coordinated structure linking the efforts of all stakeholders and national authorities* is essential for access to education and recognition of competences for all domains. All actors should be responsible for rendering competences visible, while enabling the processes towards a qualification, diploma or certificate in cooperation with national authorities ensuring coherence, transparency and quality.

The *fourth lesson* is that the anchoring of RVA into explicit and holistic strategies of lifelong learning and the broad vision of an open learning society are important factors conducive to the implementation of RVA. However, once lifelong learning has been identified as an important overarching strategy, there are a number of interpretations of lifelong learning that play a crucial role in determining the scope of the resulting RVA policy. The EU places an emphasis on the dual goal of lifelong learning: employability and citizenship. As Rogers (2014) and Knoll (2006) argue however, across Europe more generally, vocationally-oriented continuing education and training (after initial education) has been a new site for promoting lifelong learning until now. There is also a call for more informed lifelong learning policies and practices enabling the recognition and accessibility of informal knowledge in the workplace as many aspects of informal job-related learning are increasingly found to be essential to becoming and remaining knowledgeable workers (Livingstone and Guile 2012).

In developing countries, by contrast, lifelong learning plays a role in basic education and training. Lifelong learning in these countries is connected to non-formal rather than formal education. Here, learning is not only life-long, it is life-wide. Learning is promoted through engaging with the cultural practices of the learner's communities. Lifelong learning tends to be directed at the need for further learning opportunities for people who may never return to the education system, as well as for those skilled and semi-skilled workers in the agricultural and small-scale industrial sectors. It is also there to assist workers and minority groups working for low wages in small enterprises. Clearly in these contexts RVA has a great potential yet to be tapped. For example, RVA could pay great attention to cultural practices, to adults' informal knowledge, and knowledge traditions outside the formal system. RVA could be understood as a pedagogical device rather than a mere technical exercise. Skills development programmes could be reformulated as skills recognition programmes focussed on what people know and have, not what they lack. In this way RVA could identify skills bases for alternative forms of economic and ecological development. At the same time this could contribute to the development of individual and collective self-esteem. Equally important will be to give greater attention to curriculum developments that bring alternative knowledge systems into non-formal educational institutions.

7.1.1 *Multidimensional and Multi-targeted Approaches to RVA*

Based on the review of RVA in different country contexts we found that RVA is focused on three different aims, namely:

- RVA as a means to achieve an official qualification.
- RVA as an entry door to formal tertiary education institution.
- RVA as a means to make competences and learning visible.

This multidimensional perspective is important. RVA should be seen as an attempt to integrate different modes (reflective, formative and summative recognition) and different settings (work, family, community, voluntary, social work, sports) into lifelong learning. While in some cases RVA is a real opportunity to avoid a complete cycle of training, it is more often than not a part of a learning, professional or personal path.

RVA as a Means to Achieve an Official Qualification

Learning outcomes, with their emphasis on achievements rather than pathways are clearly important in opening up qualifications to non-formal and informal learning, and in providing comparability between non-formal and formal programmes. RVA can be seen as an alternative route to achieve a qualification. However, countries differ with regard to whether they reference RVA against existing formal education and training standards and institutions, or on national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes/competences. Within this fundamental division, there are differences in the way countries understand and define learning outcomes and competences according to their contexts and social and economic needs. In addition, there are stark divisions between developed countries and developing countries in the development of NQFs. The different approaches to linking RVA to national reference points – which are not mutually exclusive – can be grouped as follows.

The first group of countries, where RVA is an accepted route to qualifications, consists of Australia, New Zealand, France, Portugal, Finland, Scotland, South Africa, Mauritius and Namibia. NQFs establish common references and quality systems, and allow for the formal equivalence of qualifications recognised through RVA and formal course assessments. Quality assessment is a key feature of qualifications frameworks within this group. NQF developments such as the SCQF provide opportunities to challenge assessment approaches that dominate the formal system. Higher level definitions of “competence” through programme level outcomes or level descriptors contextualised in different occupational or professional areas can accommodate unstructured learning experience and can extract the transferable knowledge, skills and understanding which are comparable to that gained through formal learning (Whittaker 2012). Furthermore, outcome statements in qualifications frameworks have been shown to include information on graduate profiles, employment pathways and education pathways (New Zealand).

In Australia, given the comprehensive and overarching character of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), linkages between secondary education, TVET and higher education sub-frameworks can be established through the recognition of prior learning.

A *second group* of countries are those that place an emphasis on national vocational qualifications frameworks with hardly any reference to the general formal education system. Bangladesh, Namibia and Burkina Faso have either developed or are in the process of developing such frameworks. In the view of these countries, skills development and a focus on labour market requirements are beneficial to both overall economic and social development as well as individuals seeking employment. Shifting to competence-based approaches in National Vocational Qualifications Frameworks (NVQFs) has made the recognition of relevant skills and knowledge more achievable. The adoption of a pragmatic stance with respect to skills development, and the role of NQFs in vocational education and training, offers greater potential for the recognition of existing skills, particularly those found in the large informal economies of these countries. Furthermore, the skills orientation of NQFs and competence-based training are less contentious compared with the typically content-driven, discipline-based approaches of general education and university education programmes (Allais 2010). A similar development is to be seen in England's National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework, which despite being criticised for its focus on behavioural output measures of specific task and skills did much to promote APEL at pre-degree level in vocational education as well as opening up potential APEL-related pathways to higher education through higher level NVQs (Pokorny 2011). In the longer term, developing countries should consider recognising non-formal and informal learning not only in their TVET sectors, but also beyond skills development, in their higher education systems (Arthur 2009).

The *third group* includes countries with approaches that recognise learning outcomes which relate to skills and occupational standards in specific economic sectors. The approach adopted in Mexico is to make visible, validate and certify the vast reservoir of experiential learning from working life, within sectoral (occupational standards) recognition systems. Although Mauritius and South Africa have overarching frameworks, they have also both developed RVA processes in certain occupations. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning within occupational standards is recognised as potentially being of great use given the weaknesses in the formal education and training sector, and the extent of informal employment and training.

Many developing countries have initiated ambitious programmes for the development of occupational standards in order to describe the employment requirements for existing and future workers. However, these developments are infrequently integrated with vocational qualifications systems, leaving the occupational standards unused, and complicating the translation process into different types of qualifications, and curricula. A clear identification of different qualification types and how they can build on occupational standards can resolve these situations (Keavy 2012). Basing qualifications on occupational standards and labour market demand, as

well as linking them to higher-level qualifications and allowing for progression, raises the “market-value” of these qualifications. Case studies from countries have shown that occupational standards have been welcomed as potential instruments to support demand-led qualifications systems and they can also offer the basis to certify existing staff in enterprises and organisations.

The fourth group consists of European countries, which are in the process of referencing their NQFs to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The EQF is viewed as an opportunity to integrate non-formal and informal learning. Norway is discussing with stakeholders whether non-formal and informal learning should be, and through which means it could be, accommodated into an NQF in its own right (parallel approach) without having to be recognised via the formal education system (convergent approach). Austria is also making great efforts to relate learning outcomes from non-formal and informal learning that do not yet have an equivalent in the formal system. In Germany, all EQF reference levels should be achievable via various educational pathways, including non-formal and informal pathways. However, despite the willingness to introduce the NQFs, and until such time as non-formal and informal pathways to qualifications are identified, it appears that RVA will continue to be referenced against the formal educational system, rather than its direct placement in the NQF.

While the development of various NQFs in Europe has stimulated developments in educational standards and descriptions of competences and learning, countries have identified the need for further work in partnership with all stakeholders. In many countries, further efforts are required to clarify issues relating to the learning outcomes approach in terms of concepts, assessment methodologies and tools, and the balance between outcome orientation and input factors (CEDEFOP 2012).

Only further research can tell if NQFs are leading to RVA, or whether RVA is causing NQFs to be established. In any case, there are “parallel” or “divergent” tendencies in several developing countries for NQFs to serve the labour market with skilled labour, to provide a means to recognise learning that takes place outside the formal education sector, and to help those who have dropped out of the academic system to receive training oriented more strongly towards vocational practice. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning thus becomes a key issue in NQF developments. Within knowledge-based economies, parallel and divergent tendencies are apparent whereby labour markets associated with specific occupations (such as IT software engineering) drive internationally recognised individual competences to take over formal education and training programmes (Brockmann 2011). Internationally recognised individual competences of this kind require vocationally-oriented frameworks for their recognition.

It is worth pointing out that NQFs do not themselves promote RVA (Dyson and Keating 2005). Instead, this occurs through the actions of stakeholders at the workplace, individual and provider levels. For linkages between recognition practices and NQFs to be successful, they need to take into account the real world of learning and working at several levels by: (1) developing individual competence portfolios for different informal and non-formal activities; (2) linking individual learning needs and competence requirements in the workplace, the local community

and region to tailor-made education and training (non-formal) offers; and (3) incorporating work-related and adult learning activities either as integral parts of accredited programmes or as part of non-accredited programmes. In the context of knowledge-based societies, Livingstone and Guile (2012) have shown, such informal and non-formal activities can develop knowledge, skills and competence in highly effective ways, and need to become an explicit feature of supporting further education, transition to work, and the social integration of individuals in society – the important pillars of education for sustainable development.

This close collaboration between workplace, community, individual and provider levels is essential for preventing the narrowing of the richness of individual experience and the inclusive, open-ended and lifelong character of learning processes. RVA needs to go beyond the mere formalisation of experience in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. Some countries, particularly the German-speaking countries, despite their distinctive focus on vocational education and training, are careful to ensure that outcome orientations in qualifications are not reduced to narrow task-related skills and knowledge, and instead include broad descriptors of knowledge, skills and competences (moral, civic and social), learning objectives, standards and quality of input (Bohlinger 2007–2008) with the aim of promoting an all-rounded individual.

Despite the growing trend towards the establishment of NQFs, the linkage of RVA to NQFs represents an ongoing challenge and many quality assurance requirements will need to be met before non-formal and informal learning can enter into the framework. Developing countries often lack the capacities and the resources to develop credible systems of assessment and certification. This is in stark contrast to developed countries, where the introduction of NQFs are policy initiatives that are seen as “supportive of educational reforms that have far reaching implications for the management and delivery of education and training, design of programmes and assessment and certification processes” (Comyn 2009). Furthermore, developing a comprehensive framework is a huge undertaking in which countries of the South are rarely able to invest, and it is remarkable that despite financial constraints many less resource-rich countries of the South have been able to come up with innovative approaches to work towards this goal in more manageable and incremental ways. In fact, many countries are now shifting from “integrated” frameworks to “sectoral” or “bridging” frameworks, whereby in the latter case, NQFs are seen as systems of coordination, collaboration and communication, wherein different sectors are able to follow sector-specific approaches but continue to be guided within a nationally coherent system. A case in point is South Africa which has laid the ground-work for this shift, moving away from the earlier post-apartheid euphoria that existed in the mid-1990s that placed far-reaching transformational expectation on the South African NQF. In the sub-sectoral approach, the TVET sector operates alongside (parallel approach) existing educational standards in the higher education sector, with labour competency frameworks for specific industrial sectors.

RVA as an Entry Door to Formal Tertiary Education Paths

In Norway approximately 5 % of all new students in higher education are adults admitted on the basis of recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning. In 2007, 67 % of adults applying for enrolment on the basis of prior learning were admitted. This proportion varies significantly between different fields of study. However, only a very small number of students apply for exemption. This indicates that many institutions were uncertain as to how the RVA procedure should be applied. Consequently, sufficient information was not provided to the target groups. The guidelines developed by Vox for RVA exemptions are an important step forward in aiding participation in higher education (Alfsen 2014).

Many universities in Europe are widening participation of non-traditional students by making pedagogical methods used for RVA an integral part of activities of guidance and counselling (CEDEFOP 2009). These services should help to increase access to higher education and help students to choose courses or pathways that are suited to their aptitudes and interests; to pay attention to learning possibilities that can favour subsequent employability; and help students to transition to the job market. While many universities in Europe already have placement services, these are usually separate from counselling services, aimed at helping adults to find a job rather than developing their professional and personal pathways (Piazza 2013). Improving career guidance services in tertiary education essentially means creating possibilities for the interaction between placement and guidance services, transforming traditional roles of teachers into one in favour of guidance, counselling, encouraging; and the provision in the university curriculum of career management courses, opportunities for work experiences, and profiling and portfolio systems. According to Bassot (2006), career guidance has a role to play in ensuring that lifelong learning is embedded into the lives of young people and adults, encouraging them to learn and to achieve their potential.

In many countries there is increasingly a trend to put a greater focus on TVET and work experience in order to help learners to progress to higher education. In the Republic of Korea vocational qualification and other learning through workplace experiences can be recognised towards higher education credits.

RVA for Making Competences and Learning Visible

The review of RVA has shown that RVA is first and foremost about making competences and learning visible. RVA makes it possible for a person to make an inventory of his/her competences, allowing those competences to receive a value and be recognised. The RVA is practiced by many people and groups as a means to become aware of their own skills to design and implement personal development plans, but also to enrich the educational paths with additional modules and enter further formal training, and as a way of better planning for redeployment and offering one's own skills and competences in the job market.

Competences and talents can be made visible not only against pre-set standards, looking for access and exemptions, but also “geared at enabling individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competences. Education and vocational training should respond to this, by becoming more flexible and demand-driven. Formal systems such as qualification structures and vocational frameworks will then have less of a prescriptive function in terms of personal development, and serve more as a reference framework and repertoire within which there is individual choice. These formal systems retain a function as pegs for defining the direction and level of personal development and the relevant external communication with employers, mediators, referrers, schools, etc.” (Duvekot 2014, p. 24).

Studies in the USA suggest that participation in PLA programmes has various “transformational” effects on individual students in terms of self-awareness and skill development (personal, problem-solving and study skills, self-direction and self-regulation). Studies show that PLA students exhibited slightly higher tacit knowledge and processes of reflection (Travers 2011). Germany also reports that outcomes for the users of the ProfilPASS are positive. Typically, they have a greater appreciation of their own skills and, on this basis, can plan their future in a more self-confident and targeted way, and are motivated to participate in further learning. The ProfilPASS is frequently used by people who find themselves in a phase of transition or reorientation, such as those who are returning to the workplace or who are looking to set up their own business. It is also used by migrants looking for a way of coping more effectively with the German labour market.

From Nova Scotia in Canada, the Record of Achievement (ROA) project of the RPL and Labour Mobility Unit within the Adult Education Division of the Government of Nova Scotia Canada is an example of RPL methodologies that make visible the prior learning, work experience and life experiences of youngsters who may never return to school. ROA addresses the challenges faced by the close to 100,000 working age Nova Scotians with few or no formal qualifications, but who have skills and knowledge that would make them good employees in entry levels jobs. RPL is undertaken in relation to the Nova Scotia Core Employability Skills Framework. It offers the employer a validation of the skills and learning of individuals than can be measured against occupational requirements. It offers the learner an opportunity to develop a personal plan for bridging skill gaps towards securing employment or further training (Walsh-Goya and Morrissey 2014).

7.1.2 Features of Best Practice and Quality RVA Processes

Countries from across the world utilise a range of effective measures to validate, accredit and recognise learning, and while it is difficult to come up with a single “best practice” model, a range of important features, themes and principles, and successful aspects of different recognition processes have emerged in the individual country examples presented which can be usefully shared between

countries. However, these features need to be placed in the context of the degree of development of RVA in the countries. For purposes of facilitating a learning process, three groups of countries can be categorised: A group of countries with a high degree of development of RVA practices: Scotland, England, Denmark, Finland, France, Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Canada, and the USA. A group of countries with a medium degree of development of RVA practice. In these countries, RVA is gaining momentum with the development of national policies and learning outcome and competence-based approaches: such as Mauritius, Namibia, the Philippines, Thailand and Japan. A group of countries, including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso and Benin, where RVA is still under construction.

The following features have emerged as key considerations in the development of best practice in RVA:

- Standards and methods of assessment
- Delivering RVA and strengthening professionalism
- Quality assurance of procedures and processes
- Outcomes and impacts in RVA

Standards and Methods of Assessment

The utilisation of agreed standards or benchmarks is an important feature of RVA. One example of agreed standards is a general agreement on national curricula. Workplace-specific competence demands – i.e. the competences that are necessary to perform specific tasks, such as operating certain machines, or serving customers – are another. Regardless of context, and whether it is for licensure, employment, credit or qualification, there is a need to have clear criteria for both learners and assessors so that the object of assessment is identified to all those involved. Similarly, the purpose of an assessment must be clear. It is only fair to the individual and the organisation/institution to tie assessments to specific learning or performance-based outcomes. Appropriate evaluation tools can then be used to consider how learners could gain recognition and credit for their existing skills and knowledge. At the same time learners need to understand the rationale for their RVA.

Assessment based on learning outcomes has become an important quality issue in developing RVA systems. In Japan, the purpose of assessment is not to select the best, but rather to provide an opportunity for learners to show what they are able to do. This means that learners should be properly prepared to do the best they can. A lesson to learn is that the development of the proper assessment of learning outcomes should be considered to be an important policy issue, particularly introducing procedures for assessment and recognition of learning outcomes, independent of the place, form and time of learning.

Combining traditional methods and tests with other methods such as practical demonstrations has allowed relatively flexible procedures. Each assessment tool has its strengths and weaknesses. It is important to match the assessment tool to

the purpose of the assessment and in some cases, to the nature of the learner. In some cases requiring individuals to create large portfolios, for example, will prove inappropriate. Practical demonstrations and/or oral questioning might be a preferable method of assessing such individuals. Profiling skills and knowledge for the identification of learning outcomes, as practiced in New Zealand, gives learners a realistic perspective on the requirements and an effective way to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Instead of asking people to compile portfolios or take standardised tests (in the knowledge that they are unlikely to pass), other ways of assessing what people know and can do must be considered.

While there is a growing use of portfolio methods, applicants are also turning to simpler devices, requiring only a few pages, to demonstrate their ability to meet standards. Language can be an impediment to the successful completion of portfolios. There is also discussion in many countries on how methods of portfolio assessment might be improved in order to increase openness and transparency and to better enable individuals to describe their current knowledge, skills and motivation. Japan employs a type of portfolio that resembles a CV and is used to list non-formal and informal learning in the employment sector. One of the tools employed in Portugal is a biographical and narrative-based assessment that allows individuals to present their experiences in a less formal manner. In Australia, there is an increasing use of e-portfolios for gaining recognition or credit towards a formal VET qualification. Online self-assessments are useful for enabling individuals to gauge the likely outcome of applications to regulated professions or courses.

An important feature is the growing tendency towards continuity from *formative assessment* to *summative accreditation* as seen in the steps that are necessary to identify learning-outcome equivalencies, such as increasing our understanding of portfolio methods; quality assurance guidelines; guidance and counselling knowledge; and learning-outcome descriptions. In France, a clear and easy-to-follow process of assessment and accreditation has been developed. Norway recommends the use of clearly defined and described steps and stages that can be recognised by all stakeholders, as this is important for building confidence in the system. The process can consist of certain steps, for example: (1) information and guidance; (2) description/mapping of competences, including documentation from formal and informal learning, and from work practice; (3) assessment or validation; and (4) recognition of competences – and accreditation. Each step must then be defined and described. In addition, county authorities are required to register all adult candidates who have gone through a validation process at upper secondary level into a national, digital registration system, providing long-term records of learning and skills.

While there is a clear distinction between formative and summative assessment, countries must be aware of the linkages and be clear about how assessment in recognition is to be employed for their specific educational and broader policy goals. There is an increased understanding and use of *formative assessment* in some countries. Formative assessment is used in RVA to assess learning needs and to select learning material and effective learning methods to achieve the expected outcomes. The formative role of RVA is also important in terms of personal growth

and development. Acknowledging and making explicit key outcomes of formative assessment is important to its success (Whittaker 2011).

Delivering RVA and Strengthening Professionalism

The quality of RVA, including guidance and counselling hinges significantly on the capability of RVA administrators, assessors, facilitators, counsellors and guidance practitioners to set up and maintain inclusive RVA practices. RVA assessment is based on evidence and must be equitable, culturally inclusive, fair, flexible, valid and reliable, and provide for reasonable adjustment. This requires not only competent assessors and validation procedures to ensure the authority and reliability of the results, but also requires that the performance of assessors be monitored to ensure consistency in their judgements. In Australia, there is increasing action research on developing assessors' capacities, aimed at helping assessors to see their own strengths as advanced practitioners. In Portugal, professionalisation is sought through the sharing of practices, knowledge and experiences among teachers and trainers who carry out adult learning programmes and undertake validation assessments. Many countries (e.g. Australia, South Africa and New Zealand) have in place facilities for the registration of assessors. At the School of New Learning (DePaul University Chicago), the responsibility for advising, coaching the development of evidence and assessing/evaluating falls primarily to "faculty mentors" and professional experts, who serve as community-based "experts" to student programmes, helping individuals to shape a "focus area" of study and its integration within the larger degree design and requirements. The college has adopted four qualities for feedback and assessment: clarity, integrity (with regard to criteria) flexibility and empathy (Wilbur, Marienau and Fiddler 2012).

Professionalisation is, of course, not the only issue of import in this context. A recent international review (Carrigan and Downes 2010) raises concerns that assessment may alienate and frighten potential learners from marginalised backgrounds who have had negative assessment experiences in the past. This also applies to developing countries, which face major challenges when it comes to ensuring quality in the assessment of learning outcomes. Kennedy (2014) also refers to the tendency to over-assess PLAR candidates as compared to traditional learners as one of the reasons why the high demand for RPL services by Canadian-born adult learners looking for recognition by academic institutions has not materialised.

In most cases the assessment process used for RVA provides abundant additional support for applicants. The provision of information to key players is important. In several countries, professional guides and counsellors are identified, as well as trainers, to promote RVA and support candidates. In France, RVA guidance and counselling was increased, which led to the birth of a new profession, that of the APEL advisor. Mauritius, which will use Creole to facilitate RVA processes, emphasises that information should take into account the complexities of the language that often impede fair validation. In Australia a guidance document has been developed to help guidance counsellors assess the applicant's skills.

Assessors need training on effective assessment procedures, and this is the case whether an assessor is a supervisor in a workplace or a member of college faculty.

Many countries have shown that due attention should be paid during implementation *processes* to the provision of individual support to identify and document skills. The implementation of RVA should not be a cumbersome process and sufficient time should be allowed. The process of matching skills with competences described in training documentation can be off-putting for those who have had limited interaction with formal education. In Crooks, Kane, and Cohen's (1996) model, the administration link deals with the administration of assessment tasks, as task performance can be greatly influenced by the procedures followed in presenting and administering tasks. The challenges for learners resulting from this are easily underestimated.

Impact is another link in the chain described by Crooks, Kane, and Cohen (1996) and refers not to identifiable stages of the assessment process, but "the consequential basis of validity" (Messick 1989). Threats to validity can come from assessment processes being perceived as unfair as a result of exclusion from further learning opportunities due to RVA results. Negative views about the process of RVA can affect confidence in RVA. One way of ensuring confidence and fairness in the assessment could be to standardise the RVA process, from administration to feedback about the outcome. It is important that all claimants are offered the same treatment and, for example, receive guidance on the process and instruments involved. Assessment can be made more transparent by making criteria better known to the claimants.

General requirements in connection with the planning and development of RVA processes have also been highlighted. In Mauritius, RVA is yet to be extended to all sectors. The need to train RPL facilitators and assessors in all sectors prior to extending the same has however been highlighted. The identification of facilitators and assessors presents a challenge in itself and these positions are frequently filled on a part-time basis in all sectors (Allgoo 2013). The Philippines has reported that educators, instructional managers and facilitators lack the capacity to assess outcomes from non-formal learning, despite their ability to develop learning strategies using different methodologies and technologies.

Quality Assurance of Policies, Procedures and Processes

Quality assurance of policies, procedures and processes is vital for gaining trust among users. Generally, countries promote the view that core principles within which RVA provision will operate should provide a more transparent and equitable process, and facilitate mutual trust and confidence among receiving institutions. The use of SCQF RPL Guidelines by institutions in Scotland is proving to be a source of guidance, and is making possible the attainment of greater consistency and transparency. The quality principles set out in the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning are considered to be suitable for most European countries.

In the USA, a research study (Ganzglass et al. 2011) has recommended the creation of a national competence-based framework for US post-secondary education that will include certificate-level workforce education and training. The purpose is to ensure that credits acquired by currently non-credit-bearing workforce education and training, achieved in part or full through RVA, are of the same quality and have the same standing as qualifications achieved as a consequence of formal education and training.

There is already a trend in the US for some institutions to design degree programmes around student learning outcomes, or competences, rather than college credits. Evaluative frameworks are being developed in increasing numbers for competency-based prior learning assessment programmes in order to equate their effectiveness to other programme evaluation processes within institutions of higher education. Thus, instead of reinventing the wheel, CAEL standards for competency-based PLA are being interrelated with quality criteria used in the evaluation of college academic programmes with the aim of developing overarching evaluative frameworks that embed the effectiveness of PLA programmes as well.

In Canada also measures for the assessment of educational quality (e.g., CAEL standards for PLA) are applied to the assessment of prior learning in competency-based education and assessment, for example in the area of professional registration. However, there has been some scepticism expressed regarding their applicability, given their very different conditions, purposes and participants (Van Kleef 2011).

Outcomes and Impacts

An important element of quality is the issue of quality of outcomes and impacts in RVA. These will be discussed in terms of evidence on uptake; the number of certificates; use of portfolio and other tools and so on. As can be seen below, there appears to be a focus on the formal learning system and formal qualifications.

Evidence on uptake. Only a few countries such as Denmark, Norway, France, Germany, Austria and the USA have estimates on the impact on learners and their subsequent capacities to gain employment and continue into formal learning. A recent CAEL study (Klein-Collins 2010) reported that PLA students have better rates of degree completion than non-PLA students, regardless of the size, level or type of institutions. It found that more than half (56 %) of adult PLA students earned a post-secondary degree within several years, while only 21 % of non-PLA students did so (Klein-Collins 2010). A study by CAEL in 2006 (Klein-Collins 2007) into the scale and scope of implementation showed that more than half of all states had at least one agency supporting or encouraging the adoption and use of PLA methods in higher education.

Making use of RVA outcomes. Data on the use of RVA outcomes range from the number of people who appear for an examination, to the number of people who have obtained certification through RVA, and the number of credits and qualifications awarded. Data from Germany demonstrate that external students' examinations resulted in improved status for individuals and the potential recruitment of exec-

utives for companies (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science 2008, p. 21). In 2008, this applied to 7.2 % of the candidates appearing for the final vocational apprenticeship examination. The number of persons who appeared for the above examination increased from 20,700 in 2000 to more than 28,000 in 2009, demonstrating that Germany makes use of RVA outcomes on a large scale.

The number of persons who apply for RVA as well as those who go through the process has been quite high in France. Since the introduction of the system in 2002, 136,000 people have obtained certification through RVA (Paulet 2013). Different ministries (Higher Education and Research; Agriculture; Social Action and Health; Employment; Youth and Sport; Defence; Culture; and Maritime Affairs) are involved in admitting candidates' applications and granting certification.

Figures for the Republic of Korea show that uptake was high in 2009. The total number of credits issued through the ACBS rose to more than 200,000 (Baik 2013). About 500 education and training institutions participated in the ACBS at that time.

In South Africa, between 1995 and 2004 the total number of qualifications awarded increased at an average annual growth rate of 4.3 %, with the highest growth in 4-year first degrees, honours degrees and master's degrees. Education & Training Quality Assurance Bodies (ETQAs) have been able to make significant progress over the last number of years and have already uploaded 2.7 million learners' records between 2006 and 2010.

Austria has also reported on take-up and has provided exemplary data for a number of initiatives and mechanisms (Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer 2010). More than 800 candidates per year acquire the lower secondary school (*Hauptschule*) qualifications in second-chance education; approximately 5,300 persons per year take the final apprenticeship examination *Lehrabschlussprüfung* (LAP) in second-chance education; approximately 3,800 persons per year are awarded the professional title *Ingenieur*; approximately 3,000 persons have been issued competence balances at the Tyrol Centre of the Future since 2003; and about 2,000 persons have been issued the competence profile KOMPAZ at the *Volkshochschule Linz* (Adult Education Centre Linz) (Austria. Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Culture 2011).

In Mauritius, some 50 persons have already acquired either a full qualification or a record of learning to date. According to information gathered by the Mauritius Qualifications Authority, some of them have been promoted in their jobs while others benefited from a rise in salary. In effect, RVA has not only broadened participation in education and training, but as one RVA candidate said, "RVA has enhanced my confidence and given me a 'second chance' by recognising my experience and know-how." Additionally, a batch of 50 persons will be assessed shortly, of which 25 will be assessed against the National Certificate in Adult Literacy Level (Allgo0 2013).

Mexico has not to date carried out impact evaluations with respect to productivity or economic and social progress for workers, but CONOCER is in the process of developing the instruments and mechanisms to evaluate impact, such as building a database of firms, voluntary and educational institutions that certify workers, as well as a database of individual workers. However, the system currently has close

to 70 accredited centres for assessment and certification of competences, with more than 2,000 points of contact to provide services around the country. Over the 5-year period to June 2013 CONOCER has issued more than 400,000 certificates in Mexico, i.e., 65 % more than during its first 12 years of operation since 1995. This increase, according to García-Bullé (2013), may be considered a good proxy of the value that the market perceives of recognition practices. The principle behind the growth strategy of the national network of evaluation and certification entities has been to ensure market credibility.

The transformational effects of the use of *portfolio methods and other testing tools has also been highlighted*. A 2006 CAEL survey (Klein-Collins 2007) reports that 66 % of college and university administrators accept portfolio assessments for academic credit. This is an increase from 55 % 10 years ago. Standardised tests are heavily used as indicators of prior learning. About 616,000 individuals completed the General Education Development test in 2006. Thousands of corporate courses and programmes have been assessed for credit recommendations. About 2,900 colleges grant credit or advanced standing for College Level Examinations Programme (CLEP) examinations.

E-learning modules and tools that were used to integrate RVA into guidance and counselling/placement services (Europlacement 2010; Piazza 2013) were appreciated by students and job-seekers for higher education institutions and universities in eight European countries. The tools and modules supported the self-evaluation and self-analysis processes of students and job-seekers. The e-learning path allowed students and job-seekers to reflect on their competences and experiences and to identify the weaknesses in their professional profiles. Operators of the placement services, on their part, pointed out that they became more aware of the guidance needs of students and young people.

More than 110,000 ProfilPASS packs had been issued up until July 2011, including more than 55,000 copies of a special version of the ProfilPASS for young people. The digital e-ProfilPASS now available is complemented through a comprehensive range of advisory services (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBF) and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) 2008, p. 37).

The recognition of prior learning and previous competences is a factor in the uptake of further education and training. However, research in Australia has shown that RVA appears to benefit those from socio-economic backgrounds who already have experience of and success in post-compulsory education and training. They are mid-career, established in the workforce, older, full-time, and in associate professional, professional or managerial occupations. Maher et al. (2010) found that candidates from indigenous, non-English-speaking backgrounds and women returning to the workforce are less likely to access and complete RVA than other groups. Moreover, the dominant model of RVA in Australia is the credentialing model (Butterworth 1992), and Cameron (2004) found that this approach is neither relevant nor appropriate to the needs of disadvantaged and disengaged groups of learners.

A recently published survey (Guthu and Bekkevold 2010) undertaken by Vox, the Norwegian Agency for Adult Learning, has shown that a total of 55 % of all adults completing their upper secondary education (including VET) in 2008 had undergone validation of their prior learning, and 86 % of these were granted exemption from at least one module. The survey also points out the uneven uptake. In the field of vocational training, adults are more likely to choose health and social studies, where 63 % of candidates had undergone validation, and between 89 and 92 % (depending on the level of study) gained formal recognition of learning, resulting in an exemption from parts of the training schedule.

Qualitative improvements. From Portugal, there is evidence (Gomes 2013) that the National Qualifications System and New Opportunities Initiative have enabled the emergence of a new approach to the field of adult education and training, countering the low level of involvement in lifelong learning activities (INE 2007; OECD 2011). At the level of competences, new fields of learning have been identified that increase self-awareness, strengthen soft-skills and highlight practical knowledge (in particular in the areas of information and communications technologies and different forms of literacy). There are also significant meta-learning benefits (i.e., learning how to learn). Families have gained, not only through the valorisation of adults, but also through the example parents can give to their children with respect to the importance of schooling, or through their greater capacity to keep abreast of their children's studies. These aspects have had a major impact on family reading patterns and children's success at school.

The participation by adults in the New Opportunities Initiative seems to be breaking the cycle of scholastic exclusion. Companies, which have made increasing investments in the Initiative, now have greater access to confident and qualified workers who are willing to learn. Above all, the New Opportunities Initiative is viewed by all those taking part as an instrument for restoring social justice in the field of certified qualifications, which is crucial for social participation and capacity-building. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the Initiative is an open field of investigation where hitherto contrasting paradigmatic perspectives conceive new modes of intervention, new levels of response and new working methodologies and structuring of systems without overlooking the specific characteristics of the field of adult education and training which may and should be safeguarded (e.g., the contextualisation of learning processes, diversification of educational paths, singularisation and individualisation of working methodologies, and the effects of scale). However, a recent study has reflected critically upon the Portuguese New Opportunities Initiative (Barros 2013). It argues that certification and the promotion of individual advancement rather than collective identity are becoming more and more important goals of RVA. Concerns are expressed over the narrow focus of RVA practitioners to converge and standardise diverse and divergent knowledge forms into national standards.

Qualitative improvements can be noted in the context of the Equivalency Programmes in the Philippines. Despite low uptake, research has shown that learners take on leadership roles in the community as a result of increased confidence and

access to information; they become community educators and organisers, helping other people who need education; learning livelihood skills enables them to earn an income; participants learn to participate in community affairs; parents become involved in the education of their children and learn literacy as well; learners are able to negotiate with the government regarding their rights and claims to social services; as women become more empowered – they become active in the community and have more access to information related to the health and welfare of children.

7.1.3 The Challenges and Future Directions in RVA

The country cases reveal that the focus of RVA and its various forms appear to be on formal recognition through education and qualifications systems. Workplaces, non-formal activities and community life are not yet aligned to qualifications, and RVA's potential in relation to lifelong learning and the creation of learning societies has yet to be fully exploited and utilised. It is therefore likely that patterns of RVA take-up are influenced as much by the barriers to RVA as they are by the benefits it brings. In general, it can be concluded that the factors discussed below are at one and the same time conducive to the implementation of RVA in different contexts as well as constituting challenges to the development of RVA where these have not yet been put in place.

The Unrealised Potential for RVA

The data available from the Danish Ministry of Education indicates that the potential for RVA has not yet been fully realised. Pokorny (2011, p. 11) describes the unrealised potential of APEL in English higher education despite efforts by some adult educators efforts to open up higher levels of learning. Currently, institutions of higher and further education in England are encouraged to demonstrate a greater willingness to engage and respond to the specific skills demands and needs of employers. Factors that limit take-up in the Danish context include the lack of implementation of policies and procedures by providers, and the financial crisis of 2010. Furthermore, take-up is uneven. Take-up is highest in vocational training. The Danish Ministry of Education set up a working group in 2011 with representatives from social partners, practitioners, educational providers, unions and associations with the aim of realising the full potential of RVA provision (Andersen and Aagaard 2013).

In South Africa, take-up is limited by staff and resource shortages, lack of compliance with SAQA requirements, and the fact that implementation plans and projects have been developed in only a few sectors. SAQA believes that the implementation of RPL should be expanded and driven through a national co-ordinated strategy and should receive proper funding for it to have a massive impact. The Minister of Higher Education and Training established a national RPL task

team to develop such a national RPL strategy (Samuels 2013). RVA could have a major impact given the country's critical skills shortage, employability issues and historical discrimination.

Collecting Sufficient Data on RVA Impact and Outcomes

Countries acknowledge that they have not collected sufficient data about RVA outcomes to paint an accurate picture of how successfully RVA has been implemented, nor are there clearly defined benchmarks with regard to the degree to which RVA is considered desirable, and why. Given the amount of informal, undocumented RVA that potentially occurs, it is not possible to develop an accurate picture.

In the case of New Zealand and Australia, no data is available as RVA assessment is a part of the credit transfer system and is not distinguished from traditional assessment. In Canada, statistics to measure the effectiveness of PLAR as a successful intervention are difficult to find. Denmark reports that it has not systematically conducted quantitative or qualitative analyses of data relating to the outcomes and impact of RVA. The existing knowledge is based on analyses of case studies. But some small analyses indicate that RVA eases admission and/or shortens education pathways. Most of the benefits of RVA are perceived benefits. In general, policies highlight the role of RVA in creating job opportunities and improving employability and labour market mobility. However, better data on what works is needed in order to design and provide the best possible frameworks and incentives.

If an RVA policy is to be advocated, instituted, and supported, it should be possible to prove some evidence about its usefulness, and the extent to which it is achieving or is likely to achieve its objectives. The need for evidence is even more urgent in developing countries, where data is completely lacking. Developing countries need to put in place mechanisms for sourcing the available data in local contexts before, during and after the development and implementation of RVA (Keevy 2012).

Financing RVA

Costs to individuals and education systems for information and guidance, assessors, facilitators, auditors and awarding bodies represent a further systemic challenge. Canada does not have an RVA policy or a lifelong learning policy, and funding for PLAR is a matter for provincial governments. Recent research has recommended the creation of expanded financial supports through the tax system, the Employment Insurance (EI) system and other mechanisms to reduce cost barriers for adult learners and to provide stronger incentives to employers to invest in education and training for their employees. This is to be flanked by expanded public policy recognition of, and improved funding stability for, the voluntary non-profit sector as a critically important source of productive employment and learning and skills development for large numbers of Canadian adults (Canadian Council on Learning

2007). However, most funding for the adult learning sector in Canada is project-based, so that when support is withdrawn, the project cannot be sustained.

In Austria, the huge efforts and costs associated with establishing a relevant system represent a major challenge. Austria recommends ensuring financial support for institutions and/or individuals. RVA is not a cheap procedure and a considerable number of staff is necessary for the elaboration of professional references. While the recognition procedure itself need not be especially cost intensive (particularly if based on tests), the labour-intensive and time-consuming elaboration of professional standards makes up-scaling a challenging undertaking. The Republic of Korea has also reported the need for financial support and attention to this issue at a national level.

In the case of Mexico, establishing and implementing cost-sharing (state-supported and self-financing) mechanisms for the RVA of labour competences represents a major challenge. A mechanism of this kind has been put in place in France, namely the Joint Fund for Career Security (*Funds Paritaire de Sécurisation des Parcours Professionnels*, FPSPP), which is financed jointly by social partners and the state. The FPSPP is expected to provide training to a further 200,000 jobseekers and over 500,000 low-skilled employees per year. The fund emerged out of a new agreement that was negotiated with social partners in 2008 and signed in January 2009. Under this agreement unemployed workers are allowed to retain previously acquired individual training rights – the so-called “portability” feature – which they can use either while unemployed or in their next job. This legislation is very recent and its application is still embryonic, making it difficult to predict the changes that it will bring about (Paulet 2013). In France the funding of RVA is considered in relation to broader strategic issues of access, relevance and the state of the economy, rather than merely with respect to short-term operational issues.

In South Africa, the high cost of assessment and the limited number of assessment centres that focus on RVA compared with the priority given to RVA in the national policy guideline represent a significant barrier (Samuels 2013). In Mauritius, the funding of RVA has been a major issue. The pilot projects were funded by the National Empowerment Foundation, which was created to subsidise the fees of prospective, low-income RVA candidates. Namibia will soon introduce a national training levy that aims to motivate employers to fund, either directly or indirectly, the training and development of their employees. Cost is also a limiting factor in the Philippines, especially with respect to the implementation of nationwide accreditation and equivalency testing systems, individual-based portfolio assessments and other mechanisms that would allow for the better measurement and comparability of competences from formal, non-formal and informal learning.

In Denmark, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is supported by the Ministry of Education (Denmark. Institute for Evaluation (EVA) 2010). Funding is delivered through a system called the “taximeter system”, which links one-off funding to institutions according to the number of RVA candidates completing competence assessments, personal study plans, training plans within specific institutions and courses of adult education and training. The amount paid to an institution varies according to the type of study programme in which a person is enrolled. Every

year the taximeter rates are set in the spending bill adopted by Parliament, based on estimated costs per student completion in each of several streams. Allowance schemes for forgone earnings during participation in education and training are based on a co-financed system through public and private sources. Private sources include funding by companies through a national fund set up by the social partners and through collective agreements. Co-financing is more or less a universal rule.

In England, HEFCE declared APEL in 2007 a national priority area in the context of provision developed with employers and employer bodies (HEFCE 2007). Funding for the Workforce Development Programme included resourcing brokerage arrangements between employers, training providers and educational institutions. Pokorny (2011) sees this shift in priority in APEL in light of the dramatic changes English higher education is undergoing in funding, which from 2012 will see HEFCE funding withdrawn from postgraduate study, and all undergraduate subjects with the exception of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Universities will be able to increase their fees and undergraduate students will be expected to pay these increased course fees through a state-funded deferred payment loan, which for the first time will be available to part-time as well as full-time students. Within this context, and by enabling experienced students to study at an accelerated rate, APEL could provide a means for universities to attract and retain experienced students, many of whom may be unemployed due to the global economic downturn.

Countries acknowledge that RVA involves costs for the individual and for the system in terms of information and guidance, assessors, facilitators, auditors and awarding bodies. They also recommend that these costs should be kept to a minimum as recognition benefits not only the individual but also society in general. Recognition needs to be seen as an investment and a right that requires accessible recognition arrangements.

Furthering Linkages Between Educational Institutions, Workplaces and Community Life

Chapter 4 analysed separately the contribution of RVA to educational, economic, social and individual development. However, we argued that these were not discrete categories. While countries tend to place an emphasis on one or another of these, its educational, economic, social and individual effects are inextricably intertwined and the real challenge in practice is for RVA to align with the needs of different sectors and stakeholders – particularly the labour market and social sectors – and to function coherently within the education and training system, and qualifications frameworks.

The distinction made between RVA in the general and vocational domains presents a particular challenge. In the Republic of Korea, academic degrees and diplomas are developed with little regard to the competence-based Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF) and the Korean Skill Standards (KSS) (Baik 2013). According to Baik, networking with relevant systems or government organisations

such as the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, as well as linking RVA to the competency-based qualifications in the KQF and the KSS, will improve the reliability of RVA measures and make them convenient for both learners and the companies and educators involved.

At the same time, the low profile of occupational standards in educational provision still needs improvement. Many occupational standards remain unused because they are not linked to educational qualifications. Their status – especially when compared with the high value attached to academic qualifications – needs to be strengthened. In some countries this strengthening of the link between academic and vocational education is seen in the establishment of middle institutional paths (further education and training, community colleges or post-secondary institutions) that promote both cognitive and applied learning, and require input requirements in the form of work experience and its recognition.

In many countries RVA is yet to be implemented as a coordinated measure across all areas of learning. Germany, for instance, reports a lack of comprehensive procedures (Germany. National Commission for UNESCO 2011). In South Africa, the three sectors of the education and training system still operate within functional silos and there is no subsector cooperation. The lack of a co-ordinated, integrated and comprehensive RVA system has led to a fragmented approach and unnecessary duplication of RVA programmes in Namibia (Murangi 2013).

Countries have also highlighted barriers to the visibility of learning across education, working life and labour market sectors as well in non-governmental agencies. This has been reported in the case of Denmark (Andersen and Aagaard 2013). Lack of inter-sectoral cooperation results in a lack of trust in the RVA system by employers, who may or may not accept qualification documents issued through validation processes in educational institutions. In some countries it is the opposite. Educational institutions and awarding bodies are sometimes sceptical of the quality of assessments undertaken in the workplace.

Forging effective partnerships between government, learning institutions, employers, individuals and non-formal training providers is the single most important factor of success of RVA in workforce development. These partnerships are vital when RVA is linked to employability and skills development, and entail a broadening of the recruitment base for both education and employment. The promotion of effective collaboration among employers, learning providers, awarding bodies and others is also the focus of Scotland's lifelong skills strategy (Scottish Government 2007a). Cooperation between industry training bodies, registered training organisations, government learning institutions is promoting RVA constructively in New Zealand (Keller 2013). Creating consensus among relevant and visible leaders, comprising employers, workers, educators and government officials, is a critical factor in the implementation of RVA for the purposes of workforce development in Mexico (García-Bullé 2013).

Furthering linkages between civil society organisations and further education and training institutions has been highlighted by Jarvis (2008). Civil society organisations could develop socio-cultural purposes, quality systems, and guidelines that explicitly incorporate values which serve the wider community and society,

including sustainability, inclusiveness, biculturalism and multiculturalism for example. These goals, he argues, could be reflected in the number of initiatives to improve the quality of the providers of educational, cultural and sports services for strengthening capacities, improving the quality of individuals' lives, and improving mental and physical well-being (Jarvis 2008; Usher 2008). Proper systems of assessment and validation capable of evaluating the socio-cultural goals of non-formal learning are also needed.

The experience from Japan shows that non-profit organisations (NPO) which are conducted by volunteers and organised under non-profit legislation (formally known as the Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities, enacted in 2009) offer a model for recognising non-formal and informal learning through university extension programmes. The courses of one civil society group (SLG) (see Ogawa 2009) include community studies, career development, languages, children's courses, liberal arts, hobbies, sports, and special events.

Creating systematic and efficient transitions and pathways across education and training sectors and other sectors should entail exchange and cooperation among actors from educational institutions and partners from the worlds of work and social life. The widest possible involvement of such stakeholders can strengthen the systems that are eventually implemented. In this respect, it is important to establish rules and legal frameworks that take into account the interests of all the actors and that facilitate interaction and coherence of these interests.

Transcending Cultural Resistance to RVA

Evidence from countries reveals frequent resistance to the use of RVA from both higher education institutions and society in general. Many countries attribute this resistance to the fear that its introduction could result in a fall in academic standards. Research in Australia (Pitman 2009) has shown that there is a belief that the link between RVA, the learning outcomes approach and competence-based education and training promotes a reduced understanding of knowledge. There is also the perception that formal educational environments compensate for skills and attributes lacking in students with significant RVA involvement. Pitman (2009) points out that most universities in Australia offer a "blanket" RVA policy rather than anything more specific. He finds that three-quarters of this sample of universities indicate that they accept RVA, and the vast majority (90 %) provide extra resources. As Pokorny (2011) notes, in the UK, perceptions of APEL as a threat to academic standards and knowledge development by and through the academy resulted in a trend towards its application in largely WBL contexts rather than for admission to undergraduate programmes located in the polytechnic sector.

In France, the RVA movement is seeking to counter perceptions that theoretical knowledge will be compromised through RVA by ensuring its implementation across all levels of education and training. In order to make RVA an integral aspect of lifelong learning, France is undertaking broad education and training reforms. These reforms aim to enhance quality in education, particularly in the context of

the increasing diversity of a burgeoning student population. To this end, France is striving to involve all stakeholders and to improve the integration of further education and training. Other elements in this reform include the improvement of pathways between initial and continuing education; the promotion of genuine links between schools, companies and services; and the creation of synergies between general education and vocational training (Paulet 2013). Through these reforms education and training will be made more relevant to the world of work and responsive to the expectations of the ever-growing number of candidates with incomplete diplomas requiring supplementary training. Increasing flexibility in these systems will require the introduction of greater numbers of educational modules that can be assessed on the basis of competence domains relevant to jobseekers and labour markets (Paulet 2013).

Highlighting the sluggish growth in the acceptance of innovative means of assessment in some organisation-driven services for adult students, workers and professions, Wong (2011) attributes this to the lack of familiarity of universities and undergraduate colleges with adult education. According to Wong (2011) RVA practice has been more warmly accepted among faculty staff who are familiar with adult education and experiential learning and who have drawn on the works of Dewey (1925), Knowles (1970, 1975), Schön (1983, 1987) and Kolb (1984), which in turn have influenced the importance of RVA in the development of independent and reflective learners.

Van Kleef (2011), using evidence from research in universities in Canada, argues for the strengthening of education and training structures (curricula, teaching practices) that subscribe to more participative and learner-centred learning, rich learning events and construction of meaning by learners. University departments that are redesigning their programmes to provide bridges between classroom-based learning and community-based or workplace-based learning are important candidates for RVA in Canada. Van Kleef advocates the recruitment of partners to develop assessment processes and curricula structures that would benefit both conventional age students and adult learners, and says that institutional accreditation processes should concentrate on effective teaching practices as an important component of quality. Wong (2011) contends that these educational experiences are similar to RVA in that they place an emphasis on personal experience, rich learning events, and the construction of meaning by learners. Learners analyse their experience by reflecting on, evaluating and reconstructing that experience. Both have in common the role that evaluation plays in situations where there is intensive immersion in the experiences and where other people are involved. Wong, citing expanding research on Community Service Learning (CSL), says that CSL can be defined as a type of experiential education in which students participate in the community and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content and its relationship to social needs and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

In developing countries resistance to RVA has been due mainly to the relative lack of academic literacy and formal theory among workplace practitioners. A combination of academic and “everyday” knowledge could help in overcoming the

resistance to RVA. In Ghana the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) are currently working together on the introduction of the demand-oriented competence-based TVET curricula, which should further align the education on offer with the needs of its agro-based industrial economy (Baffour-Awuah 2013). Of central importance is the structural incorporation of creative and innovative skills acquisition elements (from work and informal learning) into the curricula on offer in education and training programmes of higher education institutions that could increase student capabilities in translating the theoretical knowledge gained in a specific programme to a wide variety of problems, situations and contexts. It is within this context that exploratory work is currently underway to establish a qualifications framework for TVET in Ghana.

Resistance to the implementation of RVA for admission purposes in higher education has implications for the domain of vocational education and its status in society. In many developing countries, vocational education and training is widely viewed as a second-tier subsystem located beneath the academic stream. As noted in our discussion around NQF developments, if solutions are to be found to the skills crises afflicting many developing countries, it is imperative that the status of vocational and occupationally-based qualifications be raised. In this respect, many countries are working to create national qualifications frameworks in order to enhance synergies between the academic, TVET and economic sectors. Keevy et al. (2012, p. 61) argue that the issue at stake is not simply one of relating qualifications to labour market demands, but rather one of developing a workforce at an advanced enough level of the education and training system, so as to benefit from the better alignment of the occupational standards and the qualifications system.

A better understanding of the concept and significance of the recognition of informal learning to the development of competences, Germany believes, is essential if RVA is to become a widespread reality in society in general, and education and training systems in particular. Germany highlights the need for social consensus on the value of this learning and a change in the culture of learning at all levels. At the same time Germany acknowledges that while informal learning has the potential to strengthen the status of vocationally relevant qualifications, evidence from Germany, (and even from Austria and Norway) has shown that outcomes from informal learning are most frequently used by individuals who already hold high academic qualifications. Strengthening informal learning of part-time and casual labour is therefore one of the foci of RVA strategies in Germany (Münchhausen 2011). Germany also recommends the development of appropriate teaching methods that would at the same time create systematic links between different forms of learning.

Teachers and educational planners need to acknowledge the existence and the power of informal learning. They should help participants to recognise the value of their existing funds of knowledge, bank of skills, frames of references and perceptions and expectations (Rogers 2014). Building new learning on the prior learning of each learner will need to be taken into account of learning outcomes-based and diversified assessment approaches in formal and non-formal learning.

Teachers should be trained to recognise their own “accepted interpretative schemes” (Rogers 2014) and need to become more aware of informal learning and what it achieves.

Other more specific limitations to RVA relate to the difficulties arising from the low up-take in vocational schools of formative assessment based on occupational profiles. The lack of occupational standards includes the lack of input requirements in the form of workplace experience in the vocational school curriculum. The lack of mechanisms for the recognition of experiential learning linked to career guidance and information on training options means that young people are unable to construct continuing training pathways (Cabrera 2010).

Communicating Opportunities Presented by RVA to Stakeholders

The generally *low level of awareness and understanding* of RVA is another challenge. Researchers claim that the concept and the opportunities it presents are still not well known among potential users and prioritised groups.

Sometimes training providers are *unable to classify knowledge* acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning adequately. Rather, as Germany reports, they should be able to tailor courses on offer and teaching methods to reflect previous learning. Appropriate teaching methods should be developed to promote the intended informal learning so as to create at the same time a systematic link between different forms of learning (Germany. National Commission for UNESCO 2011). The need to ensure that recognised learning is fully taken into account by providers rather than repeated by developing tailor-made courses has been highlighted by Norway. Denmark emphasises the need for greater awareness of recognition schemes and their benefits among *potential users*, including citizens, businesses and their employees, education and training providers, voluntary associations and social partner organisations in the labour market (Andersen and Aagaard 2013).

Norway and Denmark advocate the development of a trusted RVA system based on the cooperation of sectors and stakeholders. Both countries seek to raise awareness of good practice among stakeholders. In Norway, although validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning is implemented in the educational system, discussions with industry stakeholders and individuals who could profit from validation continue. Norwegian agencies showcase good practice in an effort to strike a balance between the ideals of validation and the traditional attitude that formal education is the best form of learning. Mauritius is focusing on a communication strategy to expose major stakeholders to international RVA best practice. South Africa will put in place a national co-ordinated strategy with the appropriate resources (Samuels 2013). This will be important to implement RVA on a massive scale in South Africa.

Cultural barriers at the official level have been highlighted in several developing countries. A lack of faith on the part of education officials and lack of support from management is attributed to a lack of understanding of the principles underlying

recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Education officials still have a traditional outlook on education as primarily school-based learning and prioritise accordingly. A key challenge in developing countries is the need for advocacy to raise awareness and sensitise governments to the need to give due recognition to education programmes being implemented by NGOs and community organisations with a proven track record in conducting non-formal learning.

The question of how to enable education and training providers to initiate the RVA exercise and start offering opportunities to potential candidates on a continuous basis can be fraught with difficulties. Building on experiences in practice in New Zealand and Australia, Bangladesh plans to include RVA as an additional tool that can be integrated into training agendas; and to provide registered training providers with the support, assistance and training to undertake RPL at their level. In New Zealand and Australia, registered training organisations that fall under the quality assurance framework of their national qualifications frameworks are also those that undertake RVA. It is the technical and vocational providers of education and training that have more intensively been involved in RVA, perhaps because it is these institutions that have the most highly developed outcomes-based curricula, and because their courses are mostly aligned to skills development in the workplace, allowing the links between the workplace and what is taught in institutions to be acknowledged.

National agencies and specialist organisations, such as Vox in Norway, play a significant role in gathering and disseminating information on the benefits of RVA.

Making available research results to faculty staff in higher education on high-quality learning as well as co-curricular experiences can be a good way to sensitise faculty members to the significance of non-formal and informal learning. For Canada, Wong (2011) refers to one such report (NSSE 2003) that has studied graduate attributes in terms of their participation in enriching educational experiences such as co-curricular activities, internships, field experiences, co-operative experiences, clinical assignments, community service or volunteer work, foreign language courses, work or study abroad, and culminating senior experiences such as senior projects or theses.

A report on a cross-Canada study of PLAR by Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner Howarth, Howell, Lamarre and Van Kleef (1999), made the following recommendations for overcoming barriers: increase efforts to communicate opportunities presented by RVA to stakeholders; increase the extent of professional development made available to RVA practitioners; to further develop RVA methodologies and further linkages between educational institutions and workplaces in order to enhance the participation of workers currently not connected to training institutions.

The development of materials to promote RVA to stakeholders and learners, including sector-specific “business cases” for RVA, has been debated and implemented in Scotland. The Universities Scotland HEI RPL Network was established in 2008 by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland in response to national policy drivers relating to RVA, the current focus on RVA within the context of Bologna developments and the work of the “quality enhancement themes”. Bringing together

the main education and training providers (formal and non-formal) with employers and government, the organisation is tasked with increasing understanding, awareness, use and take-up of RVA.

Participants in the Scottish Universities RPL Network have identified key areas of activity to be explored collaboratively with Scottish, UK and international colleagues: the sharing of approaches, resources and tools in order to streamline processes and make them more accessible to learners; the sharing and highlighting of evidence of success; and the development of a theoretical framework to underpin the RVA process that can be integrated into related pedagogical developments, such as work-based learning, personal development planning and employability. All the above should inspire more confidence about RVA among university staff, thereby countering perceptions that RVA processes are not sufficiently robust as indicators of student achievement and likely future performance.

The Demand Side of RVA: Encouraging Companies and Individuals

While countries have invested in the financing of RVA and other measures designed to remove or reduce the disincentives for providers and other bodies to award RVA, less attention has been given to the demand side, for example how companies and individuals can be encouraged to access RVA opportunities as a means of advancing their learning. There is often a lack of clarity with regard to whether companies are interested in competence recognition, given their preference for employees with skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal learning but without “formal” certificates, because of the reduced cost of employing formally unqualified or lower qualified persons. From some countries we learn about difficulties in involving employers with RVA. These difficulties centre on a range of questions: Who will conduct RVA? Where will it be conducted? Who will pay for it? What actual benefits will it hold for employers? As well as the development of infrastructure and processes, aligning RVA to career and skills development requires a huge cultural shift in employing organisations. From development work in Scotland it is clear that the whole process needs to be integrated within existing workforce development systems, rather than being developed as a separate (and potentially marginal) activity.

The various initiatives and programmes in RVA, both nationally and locally, are fuelling a debate on informal learning and appreciation of such learning and recognition, but there are still many challenges before widespread recognition can become a reality. Some countries like Germany and South Africa have recommended that public administration departments should take the lead by introducing RVA procedures that take account of informal learning and make outcomes visible. It has been found that people who are less educated and employees in low-skilled positions do not enjoy the same opportunities for on-the-job-learning as those with higher formal qualifications.

Regional and Sub-regional Cooperation

Finally, an important challenge lies in the strengthening of collaboration between all stakeholders at a local, regional and international level. Regional collaboration already being promoted in the context of the development of the European Qualifications Framework is proving to be a stimulus for European countries to reflect on how they can place non-formal and informal learning outcomes directly into their national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). In the European Commission, the Cluster on the Recognition of Learning Outcomes – the largest of the eight education and training clusters – supports countries in developing NQFs and systems for VNFIL. The cluster uses peer-learning activities to exchange good practice and channel collective efforts.

Several countries in Southeast Asia have called for more opportunities to learn from countries in the sub-region, such as Australia and New Zealand, who have extensive experience in accrediting and assessing non-formal and informal learning. This could be advocated as an agenda in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and in the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) regional meetings.

As cross-border migration grows around the world, recognition across national borders becomes a pressing need. In Mexico, there are calls to support Mexican migrant workers through the recognition of their competences with a view to enhancing integration into the North American labour markets.

The recognition of learning gained outside the UK is also a theme in Scotland's higher education sector, particularly linked to internationalisation. A scoping study was undertaken by the SCQF Partnership, Glasgow Caledonian University, on behalf of Universities Scotland, Scotland's Colleges and Skills Development Scotland. The outcome was the presentation to the Scottish government of three sustainable recognition and support models for refugees and migrant workers, with potential transferability to other groups under-represented in education and employment (Guest and Vecchia 2010, in Whittaker 2011).

In Africa, the harmonisation of qualification frameworks is becoming an emerging issue in regional integration and the mutual recognition of qualifications is rapidly becoming a necessity. RVA is an important component in the Transnational Qualifications Framework (TQF) and TQF procedures and policies. In this context, Mauritius recommends that collaboration between all stakeholders be further strengthened not only locally, but also at the regional and international level. Consolidating the network to include countries which have implemented or wish to implement RVA would facilitate the collection of a considerable body of information to render the RVA system more effective.

Challenges in the Informal Economy

There are challenges specific to developing countries to which RVA policy, legislation and lifelong learning strategies need to respond. The first is skills recognition

in the informal economy or informal sector. Arthur (2009) raises a number of issues regarding the planning and development of RVA for the informal economy in Bangladesh which are also relevant for other countries in a similar situation. While acknowledging that those countries which are yet to establish RVA procedures and their effective implementation face a difficult task, Arthur argues that the trend in many countries towards competence-based and learning outcomes-based systems will improve conditions for the acceptance of RVA processes. Secondly, he recommends, RVA needs to be embedded in policy, practices and funding from the outset, and priority areas need to be identified, such as the large non-formal education sector and the large number of skilled people without certification. Furthermore planning will be very important, and a relevant authority will need to take responsibility for this role (Arthur 2009). Such a process should be undertaken in collaboration with other key players such as government, industry, NGOs and social partners to ensure that a whole-of-sector approach is used. RVA information and support services should be actively promoted, easy to understand, recognise the diversity of participants and support participants with limited literacy skills. Other issues raised by Arthur (2009) are: linking RVA to NQFs; the marketing of RVA to ensure its uptake; whether any specific group (such as overseas workers) should be targeted initially to create a market process; industry needs as identified by industry skills committees; initial and on-going costs and funding; initial training of assessors and the sustainability of this process; procedures for the registration of RTOs; maintenance of a central register of qualifications; audit and moderation functions; and portfolio development.

In addition, writing in the context of RPL in South Africa, Michelson (2012) claims that RVA is essential to answer the need for a holistic analysis of workers' knowledge and skills as the basis for aligning education to social and economic development. Within this context, Michelson recommends: RVA mechanisms must be developed with clear and agreed-upon pathways from RVA to education and training and qualifications; accordingly, qualification and curriculum design must take account of the existing knowledge and skills of workers. RVA must go beyond technical approaches to skills auditing; rather it must become a mechanism to identify the best practices in mentoring, problem-solving and knowledge creation and how they can be used to inform and improve educational provision and to facilitate accreditation activities; the latter could be related to a few major industries or service sectors, such as engineering, health and construction sectors, but could also include informal horticulture and environmental protection (Michelson 2012).

Challenges in Non-formal Education

A great deal of non-formal second-chance education that takes place in the basic education and post-basic education still remains marginalised; often there are no proper frameworks to accredit non-formal education programmes; and education, vocational and occupational tracks are still separated. The study draws lessons

on certain ways to recognise learning in non-formal education. Differentiating between different types of non-formal education and training could be a first step towards transforming non-formal education and training into a field of high-value educational opportunities providing real articulation and mobility. In the *first category* non-formal education is standardised through a curriculum with equivalence to formal education. Within the *second category* non-formal learning is integrated into an NQF and assessed against formal competence standards. The *third category* includes those non-formal learning programmes run by civil society organisations which are linked to community-based learning programmes, such as agricultural extension, citizenship education, health, family planning, civic education and mass media. They are frequently not seen as part of educational system, yet are an important part of personal development, livelihood and life skills and a positive alternative route to learning.

In response to the above challenges to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, some strategic directions emerge from the country examples, particularly in relation to recognising learning outcomes in the context of community-based organisations. Firstly, countries emphasise the creation of *structures for coordinating RVA* for recognising competences and learning outcomes gained through public, private and NGO training that currently go unrecognised, including the role of local authorities in RVA implementation at provincial/territorial and local levels. Secondly, countries emphasise the establishment of *competence frameworks and alternative assessment methods* for assessing competences and learning outcomes in relation to the educational system, or sectoral and employability standards. Thirdly, they also emphasise the importance of improving the quality of non-formal learning outcomes through the establishment of *regulatory frameworks for quality* that include the development of new programmes and curricula that establish effective relationships between the workplace and educational institutions and between theoretical and applied aspects of education and training: Fourthly, the need for *professional development of community-based practitioners* has also emerged from the country examples. RVA personnel are essential to the building of bridges between non-formal, informal and formal learning. Greater recognition of RVA personnel's work as a profession, partly through the creation of quality standards and partly through further and higher education and training courses leading to recognised qualifications could enhance the quality of adult and community learning delivery as well as that of RVA. Fifthly, *accreditation mechanisms* are needed that take forward non-formal learning principles (active learning, voluntary nature of participation, socially inclusive approaches; democratic, empowering and humanistic functions.) into professional development courses for RVA personnel working in non-formal learning programmes. Finally, national authorities need to collaborate closely with NGOs to shape non-formal learning policy and practice.

7.1.4 *Lessons and Issues*

Critical lessons learnt with respect to the development and implementation of RVA policy and practice demonstrate the need for:

- high-level commitment by policy-makers, institutional leaders, stakeholders and practitioners at the federal, provincial/territorial and community levels;
- clear curricula and qualifications as the currency of learning;
- awareness-raising to highlight the benefits and opportunities of RVA to learners, employees, people not in education or employment, and employers;
- processes for RVA that do not hinder access for underprivileged people who lack educational opportunities;
- processes that can be trusted, are reliable and flexible, as well as rigour in terms of practitioner expertise, and funding models and pathways that ensure that participants save money;
- the provision of high-quality RVA information and support for candidates;
- the presence of strong links between the education sector and training sector, the world of work and civil society.

This study and the shift in priorities and practice in Member States have yielded valuable lessons with respect to the evolution of attitudes to learning outside formal settings; the growing willingness to think about this learning in terms of its various subsectors; and the critical nature of reference points such as qualifications, standards, curricula and frameworks against which this learning can be measured in meaningful and comparable ways. There is also a growing understanding that not all learning from non-formal and informal settings can be accredited against a set of predefined criteria, and yet such learning is clearly still important.

Most importantly, the debate over recent years confirms that RVA of non-formal and informal learning can and does play a key role in distributing the benefits of education and training – a central concern when considering disadvantaged individuals and countries. Examples from diverse contexts show that progress is being made.

Further exploration and implementation of RVA, particularly with respect to basic education and skills gained in the workplace and the informal economy would clearly have significant potential to assist with educational mobility and social and economic development. Each country summary sheds light on aspects of RVA mobility and equity that provides important learning for RVA policy, no matter what stage of education or learning reform a country has achieved. The different ways in which individuals gain a particular competence, reputation, or qualification to carry out their activities, are both varied and valid. It is critical therefore that the implementation of NQFs does not create a uniformity of approach that once again excludes the very people such systems are seeking to recognise and value.

The North-south approach has provided a unique and on-going opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about the social and economic space(s) that learning of all kinds can now inhabit. This approach has highlighted the relevance

of recognition for developing countries, where access to education and training has been limited, where non-formal and informal sectors are vast, and where the enormous amount and richness of informal knowledge and wisdom are integral to the lifelong learning process practised by traditional and rural societies.

The study has emphasised that recognition is primarily about learner empowerment leading to personal development, employability and relevant qualifications in the building of a learning society. It is in this wider context that lifelong learning has its true meaning and in which recognition can open up a diversity of learning routes.

The study has stressed the importance of promoting inclusiveness in education and training. This is particularly pertinent with respect to the integration of literacy and adult basic education sectors within NQF recognition reforms. Countries are advised not to reduce non-formal and informal learning to a poor copy of formal education.

Both systemic and individual perspectives on recognition need to be united to open up the way to a more holistic and integrated approach. Systems of education need to be oriented towards the resources, capacities and motivation of individuals and groups, and not the other way round.

It has stressed the importance of global benchmarks, common issues and shared educational approaches, while at the same time taking account of the variety of contexts across countries. Keeping this debate open and continuing could have profound implications for making real equity gains for individuals and their prospects; for countries and their societal challenges; and for those interested in improved equity in education globally.

There are professionals in learning and training systems that are growing into the role of lifelong learning professionals. In these new roles, they will become the ambassadors of an open and accessible learning system that offers learning opportunities to all, and learning for any purpose in any context.

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